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Nelson dismays critics of drilling

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As startling as it was for environmental groups to hear President Barack Obama's plan to open two-thirds of previously restricted areas to oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, it did not compare to their shock when their biggest advocate endorsed it.

For most of the past decade, Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Florida, has been a leader in repelling attempts to drill for oil off Florida.

But on Wednesday, just as Obama announced plans to allow rigs 125 miles from Sarasota -- 100 miles closer than currently allowed -- Nelson gave his tacit approval to the deal.

"That was the real surprise," said Adam Rivera, with Environment Florida, a Miami-based nonprofit group that has fought against offshore drilling. "I have never seen the membership of my organization so upset. They are angry at President Obama, and those who are aware that Senator Nelson apparently supports President Obama's plan, feel betrayed."

Mark Ferrulo, of Progress Florida, a St. Petersburg group that has long praised Nelson for his opposition to drilling, was dismayed that Nelson considered 125 miles far enough offshore to prevent an ecological disaster from striking Florida. Such a concession, he said, will only embolden the oil industry to seek to open rigs even closer to shore.

"That's absolutely unacceptable," Ferrulo said.

Nelson could not be reached for comment. A spokesman said Nelson considered it a victory to help persuade the White House to propose a 125-mile buffer, with support growing in the U.S. Senate to put rigs 45 miles from shore and the Florida Legislature considering allowing drilling in state waters within 3 miles of beaches.

Just four years ago, Nelson led an effort to bar drilling within 230 miles of Florida. But a 125-mile marker is still far enough to keep any potential spills from getting caught in Florida's loop currents that push Gulf Waters along the coastline and toward the Everglades and Florida Keys, said Dan McLaughlin, a spokesman for Nelson.

Equally troubling for environmental groups is Nelson's seemingly agreeing to Obama's plan before any negotiations or votes have taken place. In the parlance of poker, Nelson has shown his hand before the rounds have been played.

In 2004, Nelson used the threat of a filibuster to block a plan that would have put rigs within 50 miles. Then again in 2006, Nelson blocked a drilling bill with similar fanfare and instead won the 230-mile protections that exist today. Both of those defenses came even though Republicans carried the majority of the Senate in both years.

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Ferrulo said he is hopeful Nelson will drive a harder bargain when the legislation makes it into the Senate for debate.

Obama's proposal to allow drilling in the Gulf of Mexico is being interpreted by environmentalists as a political olive branch to Republicans to win their support for climate change legislation. The expectation is that the climate bill will be paired up with the oil drilling proposal later this spring to win GOP backing.

Nelson did give one caveat: He said his support rests on assurances from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates that expanded drilling territory will not interfere with military training and testing in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Obama administration has met with Nelson several times over the last six months to discuss the issue and get his input -- a sign Nelson is still being heard on the issue, said McLaughlin, the Nelson spokesman.

U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar specifically referenced meetings with Nelson in interviews on Wednesday with the media. Salazar did not reveal much insight into what was discussed in those meetings and refused to answer questions about whether the administration initially proposed drilling as close as 75 miles. Still, Salazar made clear that Nelson's concerns were heard.

"We have had a respectful dialogue with him and will continue to have that respectful dialogue," Salazar told reporters.

Nelson also referenced those talks as proof that he has had input into the new drilling proposal, but like Salazar did not talk specifics on the negotiations over distance.

"I've talked many times to Secretary Salazar and told him if they drilled too close to Florida's beaches they'd be risking the state's economy and the environment," Nelson said in a statement. "I believe this plan shows they heeded that concern."

Nelson's approach may be dictated by the politics of the day, said Ferrullo.

In past years when Nelson was able to repel attempts to move rigs closer to Florida, Nelson was part of a unified Senate delegation and did not have a Florida Legislature and governor calling for expanded drilling as they are now.

Last year the Florida House passed legislation that would have allowed drilling in state waters as close as 3 miles. U.S. Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., who proposed drilling within 45 miles of Florida's beaches, cited that legislation as evidence Floridians no longer opposed drilling in the Gulf.

In 2006, then Sen. Mel Martinez, a Republican, worked with Nelson to get the 230-mile buffer. But this year, appointed U.S. Sen. George LeMieux, a Republican, early on in his tenure announced he would not oppose increased drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.

"We don't have the rock solid opposition to drilling in the delegation we had just six years ago," Ferrulo said.

Ferrulo said that might explain why the Obama administration did not propose expanded drilling in California or New England, where Democrats and Republicans continue to oppose offshore drilling.

"The political forces in those states would be in an apoplectic fury if they proposed drilling there," Ferrulo said.

Ferrulo said this time environmental groups may have to lean more on the state's U.S. House delegation, which has responded more aggressively against the drilling plan over the last several days.

Within hours of Obama's plan being announced Wednesday, Reps. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa, and Debbie Wasserman Schulz, D-Weston, promised to fight the plan.

In addition, U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan, R-Longboat Key, on Thursday repeated his long-standing opposition in allowing increased drilling near Florida, fearing the impact a spill would have on the state's tourism industry.

"It's not a good enough buffer to protect Florida," Ferrulo said.

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GRAPHIC: Sen. Bill Nelson surprised environmental groups with his tacit approval of Obama's plan

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